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ABSTRACT

Through teacher-child conversation, experts use oral language to help novices take on more complex tasks; and Reading Recovery children, who are obviously having difficulty with school-based learning, are especially in need of significant conversations with adults. Reading and writing processes are supported through conversation with Reading Recovery, and moment to moment interchanges have power in student learning. Talk is especially crucial in two parts of the lesson--composing a story to write and introducing a new book. In Reading Recovery, a closely shared situation with an adult and child participating together in reading and writing provides the setting within which teachers can structure their interactional moves to meet the student where he or she is learning. In Reading Recovery, teachers are assisted in learning through conversations about their work with colleagues and others who share common understandings. Through conversations, teachers help children learn, and teachers help each other learn. Reading Recovery makes possible the power of teaching as conversation. Contains 17 references. (RS)

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Patricia R. Kelly
Adria F. Klein
Gay Su Pinnell

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The Running Record

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Running Record

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Learning Through Conversation

Patricia R. Kelly, Trainer, California State University San Bernardino
Adria F. Klein, Trainer, California State University San Bernardino
Gay Su Pinnell, Trainer, The Ohio State University

Through teacher-child conversation, experts use oral language to help novices take on more complex tasks. The important role of talk between novices and experts has been examined by many researchers (see Cazden, 1986, 1988; Green, 1983; Green & Wallat, 1987; Wood, Bruner, and Ross, 1976). It is increasingly apparent that conversation is an important support for learning (Clay & Cazden, 1990).

Reading Recovery children, who are obviously having difficulty with school-based learning, are especially in need of significant conversations with adults. Reading Recovery is designed around opportunities for teachers and children to talk together while the child is deeply involved in reading and writing. Thus, conversation is a foundation of our teaching in Reading Recovery. In this article we will explore how reading and writing processes are supported through conversation within Reading Recovery and will discuss how moment to moment interchanges have power in student learning.

We envision this situation as a kind of a conversational "dance" (maybe even ice dancing) in which both partners move in relation to each other; each depends on the other; each trusts the other for safety and production. Trust can not be left to chance, nor learning left to serendipity or osmosis.

The Reading Recovery lesson framework follows an established routine and familiar structure that supports the child's learning. In a chapter for *Children's Emergent Literacy* (Lancy, 1994) we discussed the tension between established routine and individual adjustment for the particular child:

"By being constant and familiar, a trusting partnership is quickly established. Yet the individuality of each child's program – constructed during the conversational exchange – means that no two lessons are alike for a given child and no two children's programs are the same." (p. 311-312)

Lessons provide a routine framework; but the content varies based on the individually selected books each child reads and on the child's construction of his/her own stories. Throughout the lesson, the teacher and child talk with each other. Thus, conversation weaves the lesson together. It is this conversational exchange that tailors the lesson to the individual child and makes each lesson unique. Most important, the child is working with a teacher who is aware of the impact of conversation between teachers and students and who wants to use this conversation to focus attention on the memorable examples from which the chid can learn.

Conversation Throughout the Lesson

All parts of the lesson, except the recording of the running record, require conversation between teacher and child. We have selected two components, composing a story to write and introducing a new book, from which to present examples because we believe that it is within these components that talk is especially crucial.

<u>Composing a Story</u>

Prior to writing a message collaboratively, Alyssa and her teacher, Michelle, are having a conversation that supports Alyssa's decisions about what she wants to write. The story is her own composition. The important thing that Alyssa wanted to write about during this lesson was an event in her life – falling down and breaking a tooth which then had to be capped. Her composed message was, "I got a new tooth

and it's fake." A segment of conversation between Alyssa and Michelle is presented below:

Michelle: I know you had something important to do because you missed your lesson yesterday. Your mom told me you slipped and broke your tooth.

Alyssa: Yes, I did.

Alyssa: Well, I slipped in the tub and I fell and broke my tooth.

Michelle: Did you slip getting in or getting out?

Alyssa: I slipped getting in and I went to the dentist.

Michelle: What could you write about that?

Alyssa: I went to the dentist and I got a new tooth and it's fake. It's real white (showing her capped tooth).

Michelle: What would you like to say in your story?

Alyssa: I got a new tooth and it's fake

Alyssa, with assistance from Michelle, composed the message.

This example shows the power of children's writing messages from genuine conversations about important events in their lives. It is her composition, but it is obvious that there are important learning opportunities in the task. Alyssa's finished writing and practice page are pictured to the right.

She wrote the familiar words **I, got, a,** and **it.** Her knowledge of the word **it** was used as a basis for constructing the word **it's.** She practiced writing **it's,** experimenting with how the apostrophe should be made and where it should go. Alyssa was able to write the beginning of **and** (**an**), so Michelle suggested that she write the word **and** several times to develop fluency. The word **tooth** provided an opportunity to apply her sound to letter analysis.

This student-generated message in writing was returned to reading as Alyssa put together the cut-up sentence. First she constructed the sentence in one long piece with no difficulty. Then, Michelle reassembled the sentence, this time using two lines: (1) I got a new tooth (2) and it's fake. Alyssa reread the message, using phrasing. Through all of this teaching Michelle and Alyssa kept alive the meaning of the message because of the important topic and the strong meaning it had for this child. Alyssa's message was memorable; she had brought her own constructive powers to bear on it both in the composition and in writing the message word by word.

Previewing a New Book During another lesson, Alyssa and Michelle, are getting ready to read *Baby Bear's Present,* Level 10 (Randall, 1994). A bit of the conversation is described below:

Michelle: Now, they're at the toy store and looking in the store window.

Alyssa: And Baby Bear likes the cars and Father Bear likes the trains. Maybe they can get a car for Baby Bear and a train for Father Bear.

Michelle: Yes, maybe they can if they have enough money for both. Let's see what happens inside the store.

Alyssa: Baby Bear wants the blue car.

Michelle: Yes, he does, and what do you suppose Father Bear is looking at?

Alyssa: The train.

Michelle: Yes and he tells Baby Bear "The little key makes it go." (As she pointed to a key in the picture, which was difficult to see.)

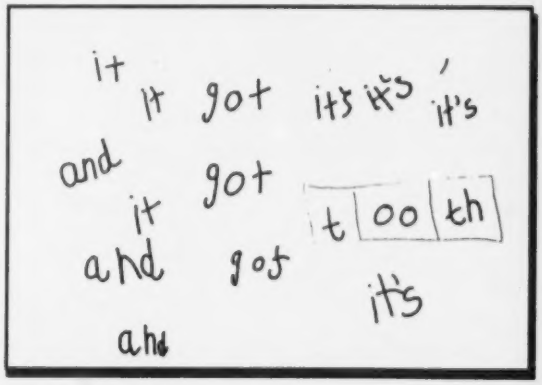
Alyssa: But Baby Bear wants the car, he's getting in it.

Michelle: Yes, and Father Bear still likes the train best. Oh, look. Now Mother Bear is reminding Father Bear that the toy is for Baby Bear.

Alyssa: They're getting the car for Baby Bear and he's taking it home!

In this social exchange, Michelle and Alyssa are sharing information and ideas about this book prompted by the piece of literature. They notice the picture and talk about the overall theme of the book in a natural dialogue. The teacher may even ask the child to find a new and important word or two in the text after the child has said what letter she expected to see at the beginning. The segment of conversation above took only a few minutes as they looked through the whole book; it resembles the talk among friends rather than a didactic foregrounding of the book, but skillful teaching is going on. Alyssa is active; she is looking at the pictures and seeking meaning. In this as in previous lessons, Michelle has actively encouraged her to look at the pictures; she has had experience discussing the story and getting support from Michelle. Through this conversation, Michelle is assuring that Alyssa will have a clear understanding of the main idea of the story and will also know some specific details that will help her make meaningful predictions as she reads this new and challenging text. In their discussion, Michelle used some of the language patterns of the story; Alyssa had an opportunity to hear these language patterns and to repeat one of them. Later in the introduction, Michelle guided Alyssa to find one of the new and important words she would see in print. The main elements here, as Clay (1993) says, are "recency" and "familiarity."

Clay contends that "every child is entitled to an introduction" (Clay, 1991a, p.335) before attempting a first reading of new material. This conversation weaves an oral language framework that supports the problem-solving needed to read more challenging texts. The primary purpose of this introduction was to enable Alyssa to maintain meaning while she engaged in problem-solving related to unfamiliar words (as Clay says, "reading for meaning with divided attention.")



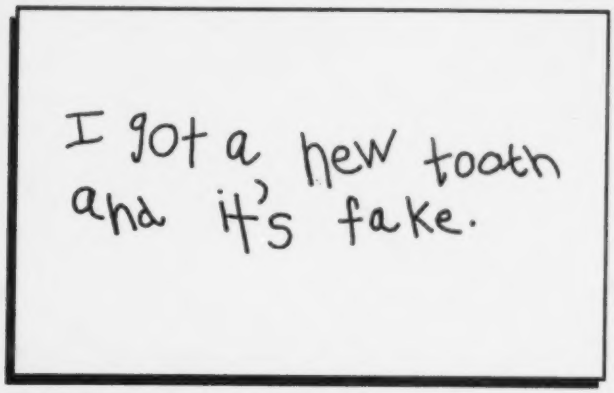
Assisted Learning

In Reading Recovery, a closely shared situation with an adult and child participating together in reading and writing provides the setting within which teachers can structure their interactional moves to meet the student where he or she is in learning. Reading Recovery teaching is designed to support the young learners' construction of critical knowledge about literacy. Research in language and literacy learning supports the idea that children construct for themselves the internal strategies needed for independent reading and writing (Cazden, 1972; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984). This theoretical position has sometimes been mistakenly interpreted to diminish the role of teaching. Tharp and Gallimore (1988) contend that "in American classrooms, now and since the 19th century, teachers generally act as if students are supposed to learn on their own" (p. 3).

Clay, however, makes a strong argument for teaching, broadly defined; she succinctly states, "I see no reason to make him discover these alone." (Clay, 1991b, p. 274).

McDermott (1977) describes a "trusting relationship" between teacher and child. By "trust" he does not mean a basic common definition, but one that suggests that both the teacher and child know what is expected and have trust that they are working together to achieve a goal that both value. We envision this situation as a kind of a conversational "dance" (maybe even ice dancing) in which both partners move in relation to each other; each depends on the other; each trusts the other for safety and production. Trust can not be left to chance, nor learning left to serendipity or osmosis.

It is the responsibility of both partners, with the adult bearing the far greater responsibility, to make expectations clear by showing, telling, and demonstrating, and then by conversing to check understandings. In Reading Recovery, it is the teacher's responsibility to make sure that the child knows the task; that makes it "easy to learn." Conversation assists the process.



In Reading Recovery an expert and a novice participate together in a task; opportunities are available for the novice to be active and for the expert also to be active in a variety of ways that respond to the learner's moves. The adult determines the requisite shifts over time in both interaction and responsibility as readers show by their behaviors that they are becoming more independent and taking over the process. This shifting over time is a key element in fostering independence. In Lancy, we described a process others have called "guided participation":

"This shared problem solving, involving an active learner participating with a more skilled partner, has been described by Rogoff (1990) as apprenticeship. Rogoff (1990) stresses several features of guided participation: (1) the importance of routine activities; (2) tacit as well as explicit communication; (3) supportive structuring of novices' efforts; and (4) transfer of responsibility of handling skills to novices." (Kelly, Klein, and Pinnell, 1994, p.321)

Put another way, Wood (1988) has described this interaction as experts helping novices to push the boundaries of their own learning, doing with assistance what they could not do alone.

In Reading Recovery, teachers, also, are assisted in learning through conversations about their work with colleagues and others who share common understandings. Reading Recovery provides opportunities for ongoing interactions that support teacher development through conversations "behind the glass," conversations after observing lessons together, conversations over lesson records, and conversations with colleagues at conferences and institutes. Ongoing colleague conversation is an integral part of Reading Recovery and a highly valued learning opportunity.

Additionally, in recent years, many Reading Recovery teachers have fostered broader conversations among the primary teaching staffs at their schools. Seeking conversations with colleagues is challenging and informative, and can be a catalyst for and contributor to reshaping primary literacy education in each school. New thinking comes from new conversations. The challenge is to create a school culture which provides opportunities for all teachers to talk about and analyze their work.

Conclusion

Whether we are talking about ourselves or our work with young students, oral language is an essential base for learning. Through conversations, we help our children learn, and we help each other learn. Reading Recovery makes possible the power of teaching as conversation.

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